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Abstract

The essay's starting point is Shelley's conviction that poetry 'marks the before unapprehended relations of things' and his consequent way of using 'words' in his prose as 'pictures of integral thoughts', even as he worries that they may turn out to be merely 'signs for portions and classes of thoughts' (*A Defence of Poetry*). The essay shows how Shelley's prose thinks through its style in multiple ways: section 2 examines the ironies at work in 'An Address to the People on the Death of the Princess Charlotte'; section 3 turns its attention to *A Philosophical View of Reform* and that work's enactment of complicated rhetorical strategies; section 4 examines Shelley's essays on religious matters, such as his essay 'On Christianity', and brings out their concern to dramatize and allow for tensions; and section 5 explores Shelley's metaphysical prose before returning to questions of poetics with which the essay began.

Keywords

Shelley; poetics; prose; style; strategy; tension; *A Defence of Poetry*

‘Pictures’ and ‘Signs’

Creative Thinking in Shelley’s Prose, 1816–21

Michael O’Neill

In a passage from *A Defence of Poetry* (1821), to which this essay will return at its close, Shelley traces a seemingly inevitable process by which language loses its initial energy of metaphorical life. Of ‘poets’ he declares:

Their language is vitally metaphorical; that is, it marks the before unapprehended relations of things, and perpetuates their apprehension, until the words which represent them become through time signs for portions and classes of thoughts, instead of pictures of integral thoughts; and then, if no new poets should arise to create afresh the associations which have been thus disorganized, language will be dead to all the nobler purposes of human intercourse.¹

It is for providing ‘pictures of integral thoughts’ that Shelley values ‘vitally metaphorical’ language, for imaging thoughts as accessible and entire entities rather than as ‘signs’. But in fact he is able to turn the entropic decline from ‘pictures’ to ‘signs’ to his creative advantage. In an immediate upswing, the ‘nobler purposes’ referred to here as involved in the discovery of ‘new relations’ find their advocate in Bacon, who is said to speak of the likenesses found by the poet as ‘the same footsteps of nature impressed upon the various subjects of the world’.²

The fear that language will grow ‘disorganized’ and the need for poets to ‘create afresh’ weave in and out of one another. It is because of this fear and this need that ‘Apprehension’, in Ross Wilson’s words, ‘itself must be alive’.³ Language’s very frailty and inadequacy—Shelley’s sense, as he puts it in one of his brief, fragmentary ‘Speculations on Morals and Metaphysics’, that ‘Our words are dead, our thoughts are cold & borrowed’, or that ‘Words are the instruments of mind . . . , but they are not mind, nor are they portions of mind’—provide the tinder which ignites his prose into eloquent, counter-active flame.⁴ That sense of language’s deficiencies helps to explain why his prose is that of a poet, concerned, like Plato, ‘to kindle a harmony in thoughts’,⁵ aware that ‘harmony’ involves both a necessary awareness of the possibility of discord and a commitment to the imagination: ‘there is a principle within the human being . . . which acts otherwise than in the lyre, and produces not melody alone, but harmony’.⁶ Harmony involves responsiveness and adjustment, a thinking through the language being used, with a full recognition of its constraints and possibilities, and a strong awareness that meaning is being wrought into glowing but provisional being in the act of ‘communicating and receiving intense and impassioned conceptions respecting man and nature’, Shelley’s account of what poetry is towards the end of *A Defence of Poetry*.⁷ His attunement to the literary quality of thinking is a major reason why, as James Donelan has it in a recent review, ‘Shelley has long defied attempts to create a systemic account of his thought in criticism.’⁸

A central argument in this essay, which draws examples from Shelley’s metaphysical, political, religious, and literary critical writings between 1816 and 1821, is that his prose, like his verse, is poetic to the degree that it builds on his belief, ably explored by William Keach, that ‘language is arbitrarily produced by the Imagination and has relation to thoughts alone’.⁹ *On Life* (1819), conscripted by Earl

Wasserman as a solution to various philosophical conundrums, works more as a prose poem, a reverie on a word, than as a philosophical mini-treatise, though it does include a review of Shelley's early philosophical allegiances. Logic and rhetoric are at the service of a sense of wonder. 'Life, the great miracle, we admire not, because it is so miraculous.'¹⁰ There, 'because' mocks the quasi-causal explanation it offers. Thinking about a word—'life'—leads the essay to contemplate what it will call 'that verge where words abandon us, and what wonder if we grow dizzy to look down the dark abyss of—how little we know'.¹¹ Words mime their impulse to 'abandon us' through an assonantal off-chime between '*abandon*' and '*wonder*', and through a full rhyme between 'we *grow* dizzy' and 'how little we *know*' (emphases added). Such effects suggest an acute linguistic self-awareness at the very moment that Shelley imagines words leaving us in the lurch.

Throughout *On Life*, to be reduced to ignorance is to be saved from 'an education of error', caused by the mind's misplaced confidence in structures that it imposes on itself through 'the misuse of words and signs, the instruments of its own creation'.¹² In its place, Shelley works to persuade us and himself of an idealism which he sees as creating a vacancy to be filled with imaginings that take their life and newness from the view that 'nothing exists but as it is perceived' and the counter-view that 'Mind . . . cannot create, it can only perceive'.¹³ But the essay achieves its own creativity through its continual assaults on common understanding, including the use of words to suspend the meanings normally associated with them. The following passage allows one to see how Shelley manages such an assault and such a suspension:

Pursuing the same thread of reasoning, the existence of distinct individual minds, similar to that which is employed in now questioning its own nature, is likewise found to be a delusion. The words, *I*, *you*,

they, are not signs of any actual difference subsisting between the assemblage of thoughts thus indicated, but are merely marks employed to denote the different modifications of the one mind. . . . The words *I*, and *you* and *they* are grammatical devices invented simply for arrangement and totally devoid of the intense and exclusive sense usually attributed to them. It is difficult to find terms adequately to express so subtle a conception as that to which the intellectual philosophy has conducted us. We are on that verge where words abandon us, and what wonder if we grow dizzy to look down the dark abyss of—how little we know.

The relations of *things* remain unchanged by whatever system.¹⁴

‘Pursuing the same thread of reasoning’; ‘questioning its own nature’: thought is an active process, ongoing, living by and in the present participles that it generates. In proposing that ‘the words *I* and *you* and *they* are grammatical devices invented simply for arrangement and totally devoid of the intense and exclusive sense usually attributed to them’, Shelley intimates that ‘life’ is wholly different from the ‘multitude of entangled thoughts’¹⁵ which constitutes common-sense mental experience. Instead, he uses the fiction of his own individuality to propose, through a style that questions the validity of ‘grammatical devices’, the truth of ‘the one mind’. Here the fact that language is a common property rather than the possession of an individual cleverly supports his argument, an argument that takes him with poetic rigour into a place where he contends that ‘the existence of distinct individual minds similar to that which is employed in now questioning its own nature, is . . . found to be a delusion’. The ‘one mind’ is a duplicitously uncertain and suggestive notion. It may be related to ‘the popular notion in critical works of the period of “the public mind” . . . an

atmosphere of common opinion within which all think and act', which Timothy Clark suggestively offers as a gloss. At the same time, it points towards a concept that jars with any idea of 'common opinion'.¹⁶ For Shelley, language imagines the abolition of distinctions which it seems crucially part of linguistic structures to sustain. His words perform a serendipitous trick: they convey the idea of a 'distinct individual mind' (which from a strictly philosophical perspective is 'a delusion') and they adumbrate an all-subsuming yet elusive 'one mind' from which the writer is debarred by his individuality and to which he is connected by language. Indeed, to the degree that language embraces, formulates, and refigures the idea of the 'one mind', it comes close to being its sole witness and guarantor.¹⁷

Writing becomes a discovery of the truth of one's own phantasmal absence, when presence is the dubious or 'delusory' gift of the 'popular philosophy',¹⁸ yet writing, relying on and displaying what Jonathan Culler calls 'the power of its own evocativeness',¹⁹ is also the locus of a new freedom. The urbane rider—'The relation of *things* remains unchanged by whatever system'—shows Shelley playing with words for a serious purpose: to free the mind from its own constructions. Language, Shelley's words persuade us, is veil and pointer to what lies beyond the veil. In Wasserman's words, language reveals to Shelley that 'There is a veil between Existence and Seeming, and although we can construct philosophically for ourselves the undifferentiated unity that is the nature of Existence, we cannot avoid the fact that we live an illusion and cannot experience Existence directly.'²⁰ Yet this gloss suggests the dismay of the virtuous philosopher; what delights the chameleonic prose-poet is a conceptual restlessness that dizzies the mind gazing into the abyss.

* * *

Shelley's prose thinks through its style in multiple ways, as in the cunning rhetoric of his essay *An Address to the People on the Death of the Princess Charlotte* (1817). The essay thinks allusively and by indirections. It opens by referring to the death of Princess Charlotte in childbirth on 6 November 1817, which it will then link to the execution of the 'Pentridge Three': Jeremiah Brandreth, Isaac Ludlam, and William Turner, hanged and drawn 'for treasonable utterances and actions which they had been entrapped into making and performing by a Government *agent provocateur* going by the name of William Oliver'.²¹ As Martin Priestman has observed, Shelley begins with an unignorable echo of Wordsworth's 'A slumber did my spirit seal':²² 'The Princess Charlotte is dead. She no longer moves, nor thinks, nor feels. She is as inanimate as the clay with which she is about to mingle.'²³ Summoning up Wordsworth's poem, Shelley makes us wonder whether the dead princess lives on, her life spirit transfused into some new creation: the residual effect of alluding to a poem that refers to 'a thing that could not feel / The touch of earthly years'.²⁴ From the essay's beginning, Shelley seeks to democratize and extend the reach of affective rhetoric, paraphrasing Shylock in the second of his roman-numbered paragraphs (the roman numbers a touch that lends the piece an air of funeral dignity) as he speaks on behalf of 'thousands of the poorest poor': 'And have they no affections? Do not their hearts beat in their bosoms, and the tears gush from their eyes? Are they not human flesh and blood? Yet none weep for them—none mourn for them—none when their coffins are carried to the grave (if indeed the parish furnishes a coffin for all) turn aside and moralize upon the sadness they have left behind.'²⁵

Through such allusive means, what seemed initially to be a lament for a young princess turns into a virtuosic exercise in polemic. Shelley's skill in a polemical vein is evident from an early stage, as in *Queen Mab* (1813). Yet, as with other texts

explored in this essay, *An Address to the People* demonstrates Shelley's developing ability to write successfully by thinking through the meanings of tropes and expected phrases. In *An Address to the People*, such thinking continues until the mourned-for royal figure turns out, at the very end of the piece, to be the 'Spirit of Liberty' (see the extract). The close of the essay works cumulatively:

XI. Mourn then People of England. Clothe yourselves in solemn black. Let the bells be tolled. Think of mortality and change. Shroud yourselves in solitude and the gloom of sacred sorrow. Spare no symbol of universal grief. Weep—mourn—lament. Fill the great City—fill the boundless fields, with lamentation and the echo of groans. A beautiful Princess is dead:—she who should have been the Queen of her beloved nation, and whose posterity should have ruled it forever. . . . LIBERTY is dead. Slave! I charge thee disturb not the depth and solemnity of our grief by any meaner sorrow. If One has died who was like her that should have ruled over this land, like Liberty, young, innocent, and lovely, know that the power through which that one perished was God, and that it was a private grief. . . . Let us follow the corpse of British Liberty slowly and reverentially to its tomb: and if some glorious Phantom should appear, and make its throne of broken swords and sceptres and royal crowns trampled in the dust, let us say that the Spirit of Liberty has arisen from its grave and left all that was gross and mortal there, and kneel down and worship it as our Queen.²⁶

The style is one of solemn funeral performance, almost verging on parody: 'Clothe yourselves in solemn black. Let the bells be tolled. Think of mortality and change.'

There is a faint, unmistakable flicker of something sardonic in 'Spare no symbol of

universal grief' or in the triple run of imperatives: 'Weep—mourn—lament'. All these are actions, the prose makes one feel, which a person might play; the passage adapts and resourcefully exploits the language of processional elegy.²⁷ It is as though Shelley were casting a cold eye on the capacity of his audience to be manipulated by language. Simultaneously he engages in exactly that, a process of manipulating his audience, as he moves towards the subversion of his climax: this is no young princess for whom sentimental dolour is being prescribed; it is an abstraction. Priestman cannily reads the 'public lamentation for Charlotte as the unconscious expression of a deeper suffering, which Shelley is bringing to the surface almost like a psychoanalyst'.²⁸ Shelley corporealizes an abstraction as though Liberty were the princess, but he works to make us grieve for an abstraction as though it had a reality even greater than a person. One of his manoeuvres is to interrupt the prose after the assertion that 'LIBERTY is dead' with a peremptory address: 'Slave! I charge thee disturb not the depth and solemnity of our grief by any meaner sorrow.' Peter McDonald finds in Shelley's use of the word 'slave' an inability or a refusal to see that the word names 'a reality of servitude and suffering', but the word effects, in context, a salutary shock: there is 'a reality of servitude and suffering' in Shelley's England, and one of its traces is subjugation to the ideology of monarchy, an ideology that is at once unreal trappings and ceremony, and basis for an only too real state of injustice.²⁹ Those who mourn for Princess Charlotte and are indifferent to the death of Liberty are enslaved to an unjust political system responsible for the suffering of thousands.

Shelley's task is to bring home to his reader the recognition that Auden will embody in sonnet XVI from his sequence 'In Time of War', both that human beings, 'unlike an idea, can die too soon' and that 'ideas can be true although men die' so that

‘we can watch a thousand faces / Made active by one lie’.³⁰ Auden claimed to dislike Shelley, recasting Shelley’s own *Rasselas*-derived formulation at the close of *A Defence of Poetry*: “‘The unacknowledged legislators of the world’ describes the secret police, not the poets.’³¹ But there is an affinity between the writers in their fascination with the relationship between lived experience and ideas. We live the lives we lead because of the thoughts we think.

At the close of *An Address to the People*, Shelley’s prose is haunted by the fact that the language of a certain kind of poetic prose falls in with the language of power, to adapt a famous axiom from Hazlitt’s essay on *Coriolanus*, published as part of *Characters of Shakespear’s Plays* in 1817 and, in part, in *The Examiner* in 1816, and thus likely to be an important point of reference for Shelley’s essay. Hazlitt remarks that ‘The cause of the people is indeed but little calculated as a subject of poetry; it admits of rhetoric, which goes into argument and explanation, but it presents no immediate or distinct images to the mind.’³² Shelley implies, through his practice, agreement with Hazlitt’s proto-Yeatsian distinction between ‘rhetoric’ and ‘poetry’.³³ Yet that distinction is itself the matter for thought in Shelley’s prose. Thinking through style is thinking about style for Shelley, as his pamphlet’s Paineite epigraph indicates: ‘We pity the plumage, but forget the dying bird.’³⁴ That is Tom Paine, mocking Burke’s high-flown grief for the fate of Marie Antoinette and the aristocracy, but showing how attacks on rhetoric can themselves end up tangled up in rhetoric, figurality. To understand Paine’s point we have to realize that the plumage is aristocratic show and display, and the dying bird is the people for whom Burke cannot be bothered to shed a tear, but the metaphor has oddly, inconsequentially organic implications, suggesting, surely against Paine’s conscious intention, a living or dying link between plumage and bird.

Shelley fuses common feeling with hints that we risk complicity in unthinkingly dangerous over-emotionalism: so, Paine's 'He pities' is altered to 'We pity'. As Michael Scrivener has argued, Shelley avoids a 'new sentimentality, because the suffering he laments can be changed'.³⁵ Throughout, Shelley plays daring games with different 'voices', in part because, as Scrivener also notes, 'he wished to reach a popular audience',³⁶ but also because he is deploying words to subvert preconceptions and inviting us to 'create afresh' our political thinking. The push at the end towards what Scrivener calls a 'republican' rather than 'moderate' language accompanies a modulated switch into future-based allegorizing, as, anticipating the close of 'England in 1819', Shelley writes of the possible appearance of 'some glorious Phantom'.³⁷

Any harmony that emerges from *An Address* derives from calculated dissonances. So, the 'glorious Phantom', where Shelley appears to be playing on, mocking and revising the idea of the 'glorious Revolution', will 'make its throne of broken swords and sceptres and royal crowns'. Shelley employs a tactic of redirected suggestion. The anti-monarchical figure of Liberty cannot for Shelley be imagined but through the language of what it (Liberty) opposes: thrones, royal crowns, and so forth. Steven Jones makes the point that Shelley uses 'the devices of accelerating syntax, vivid imagery, and linguistic substitution as one thing replaces another in rapid succession: Liberty replaces the future Queen, 'a "spirit" replaces a corpse, a vital ideal replaces a moribund institution, the Crown'.³⁸ Yet the replacements are ghosted by the problems as well as the opportunities of opportunist rhetoric ('let us say') and the felt need to use the language of the enemy: 'kneels down and worship it'.

* * *

Itself 'broken' or breaking and redeploying the other side's weapons, embattled and conflict-aware, sometimes conflicted, Shelley's language retains a near-sardonic

reflexivity in its deployment of a kind of republican sublimity or Utopian futurity. Part of Shelley is forever battling with what he takes to be illusory or self-deceiving modes of thinking embedded in the language of politics.³⁹ His deliberated yet explosive assault in *A Philosophical View of Reform* (1819–20) on ‘the ‘aristocracy of attorneys and excisemen, and directors, and government pensioners, usurers, stock jobbers, country bankers, with their dependants and descendants’ is part of a wider, deeper consideration—one in which the reader may discern covert self-involvement—of why an aristocracy exists at all.⁴⁰ Shelley treats this second aristocracy with the disdain of someone who belongs to the first aristocracy; he says of the group of ‘attorneys and excisemen’ and so forth that ‘These are a set of pelting wretches in whose employment there is nothing to exercise, even to their distortion, the more majestic faculties of the soul.’⁴¹ In context, the echo of *King Lear* is divided in impact: ‘Poor naked wretches, whereso’er you are, / That bide the pelting of this pitiless storm,’ exclaims Lear on the heath.⁴² Shelley sees the attorneys, excisemen and others as injurers and victims by virtue of the peculiarly compressed nature of his allusive texture.

In thinking about ‘aristocracy’, Shelley takes a haughtily detached view: ‘Mankind seem to acquiesce, as in a necessary condition of the imbecility of their own will and reason, in the existence of an aristocracy.’⁴³ This view builds on what might be called a linguistic history of the class: ‘Since usage has consecrated a distortion of the word aristocracy from its primitive meaning, let me be allowed to employ the word aristocracy in that ordinary sense which signifies that class of persons who possess a right to the labour of others, without dedicating to the common service any labour in return.’⁴⁴ The existence of such a ‘class of persons’, Shelley goes on, ‘is a prodigious anomaly in the social system’.⁴⁵ The ‘primitive meaning’ must be

something like ‘best power’, ‘best citizens’, and one notes how Shelley harps on ‘the word aristocracy’, the phrase repeated twice, as though the author were intent on disarming it of its fascination while conceding, in the process of doing so, that the word is fascinating, needs to be disarmed. If it is disarmed, it is so by Shelley’s very particular use of that species of subversive paraphrase he has already used in relation to the aristocracy as embodying ‘in truth the interests of the rich’.⁴⁶ He goes on, there, to argue that ‘Monarchy is only the string which ties the robber’s bundle’ in one of his sharp descents into a Cobbett-like, scornfully plain English.⁴⁷ But he is conscious that there is, in the word, something

to exercise, even to their distortion, the more majestic faculties of the soul. Though at the bottom it is all trick, there is something frank and magnificent in the chivalrous disdain of infamy connected with a gentleman. There is something to which—until you see through the base falsehood upon which all inequality is founded—it is difficult for the imagination to refuse its respect, in the faithful and direct dealings of the substantial merchant. But in the habits and lives of this new aristocracy created out of an increase [in] the public calamities, and whose existence must be determined by their termination, there is nothing to qualify our disapprobation.⁴⁸

As indicated above, what follows suggests that Shelley ultimately feels that he is making a distinction without a real difference: the combined effects of both forms of aristocracy are harmful and unfair. But though his somethings and his nothing blend as well as clash, he engages in a drama of thought, a rehearsal of the arguments, a giving way in incidentals if not in main substance to a Burkean position, an acknowledgement that, in politics, faculties of soul and imagination have their place,

cannot be wholly disregarded, must be attended to, if the ‘trick’ to which they often succumb is to be explained and exposed.

In *A Philosophical View of Reform*, arguing that ‘That equality in possessions which Jesus Christ so passionately taught is a moral rather than political truth,’⁴⁹ Shelley asserts:

We may and ought to advert to it, as to the elementary principle, as to the goal, unattainable perhaps by us, but which, as it were, we revive in our posterity to pursue. We derive tranquillity and courage and grandeur of soul from contemplating an object which is, because we will it, and may be, because we hope and desire it, and must be, if succeeding generations of the enlightened sincerely and earnestly seek it.⁵⁰

This is a rhythm typical of Shelley’s prose: one might call it, with the last stanza of *Prometheus Unbound* in mind, hope creating from its own wreck the thing it contemplates. The movement from the ideal that ‘is, because we will it’ to one that ‘may be, because we hope and desire it’ to one that ‘must be, if succeeding generations . . . seek it’ is stirring but also alert to the dynamics of will, hope, and desire. Momentarily the far-off ideal is made to seem the only possible goal we should seek to attain. However, the subsequent turn is also characteristic of Shelley: ‘But our present business is with the difficult and unbending realities of actual life, and when we have drawn inspiration from the great object of our hope it becomes us with patience and resolution to apply ourselves to accommodating our theories to immediate practice.’⁵¹ Shelley’s prose audibly knuckles under here, ‘accommodating’ itself to ‘the difficult and unbending realities of actual life’, where all three adjectives earn their keep: ‘difficult’ suggesting the need for realism, ‘unbending’ indicating the nature of the difficulties, and ‘actual’ implying a distinction between where we are

and where we would like to be, seen as ‘unattainable’. The braced way in which the sentence takes the strain of its realization, however, indicates the author’s unwillingness to let go of the ‘inspiration’ to be ‘drawn . . . from the great object of our hope’.

* * *

Shelley’s religious prose, prose which has as its main theme the ultimate spiritual destiny of human beings, reveals a comparable double rhythm. Often its finest moments involve a turn, or a redefinition, a mobile life in the process of writing that is equivalent to that ‘living by ideas’ which Arnold praises in ‘That return of Burke upon himself’ in Burke’s *Thoughts on French Affairs*.⁵² Examples occur in *On Christianity* (1817), a work that is at once critical of ‘the gross imaginations of the vulgar relatively to the ruling Power of the universe’ and surprisingly, if one thinks of Shelley as authoring *The Necessity of Atheism* (1811), interested in trying to define ‘God’ as ‘the interfused and overruling Spirit of all the energy and wisdom included within the circle of existing things’.⁵³ That ‘acceptation’ of the term keeps in play various possibilities:⁵⁴ ‘the circle of existing things’ sounds a materialist note, while ‘interfused and overruling Spirit’ in Spinozist mode balances the pantheist and spiritual. Other definitions in the work swing between the humanist and the quasi-transcendental, before a perilous harmony emerges. The humanist perspective shines through the comment that the person who ‘only aspires to that which the divinity of his own nature shall consider and approve .. he, has already seen God’.⁵⁵ This emphasis, with its reworking of traditional usages, immediately passes into shifts and reconsiderations: ‘We live and move and think, but we are not the creators of our own origin and existence . . . There is a Power by which we are surrounded, like the atmosphere in which some motionless lyre is sustained, which visits with its breath

our silent chords at will.⁵⁶ Beginning with a complex echo of Acts 17:28 that acknowledges dependence on a higher power, even if that power may be internal, it seems no accident that this different sense of God (Shelley will go on to say ‘This power is God’) is inextricable from an account of poetic inspiration.⁵⁷ Later Shelley will shift into a more conceptual mode, as he brings humanity and God into alignment, asserting that ‘The perfection of the human and the divine character is thus asserted to be the same’, though at this stage he is paraphrasing Jesus’s teaching.⁵⁸ In offering its own account of Christ’s teaching, the essay gives itself room to explore Shelley’s own thinking, while allowing for a gap between the two. And not just Shelley’s thinking; thought here is deeply entangled with hope and desire:

We die, says Jesus Christ; and, when we awaken from the languor of disease, the glories and the happiness of Paradise are around us. All evil and pain have ceased for ever ... Our happiness also corresponds with and is adapted to, the nature of ... what is most excellent in our being. We see God, and we see that he is good. How delightful a picture even if it be not true! How magnificent and illustrious is the conception which this bold theory suggests to the contemplation, even if it be no more than the imagination of some sublimest and most holy poet, who, impressed with the loveliness and majesty of his own nature, is impatient, discontented, with the narrow limits which this imperfect life, and the dark grave have assigned forever as his melancholy portion.⁵⁹

The passage plays the delights of hope against a sober sense of likely reality in the exclamatory ‘How delightful a picture even if it be not true!’ A doubleness of feeling courses through the writing. So, the phrase ‘no more than the ‘imagination of some sublimest and most holy poet’ typifies the subtlety that pervades the writing; beneath

sadness at the sway exercised by the reality principle is a final twist that suggests that the matter is seen as it is because of 'narrow limits'. The reader is pulled between melancholy and a recognition of the value of the 'imagination of some sublimest and most holy poet'. The final effect, that is, of 'the narrow limits which this imperfect life, and the dark grave have assigned forever as his melancholy portion' is as much protesting rejection as acquiescence. Gavin Hopps is persuasive when he argues that 'What we can see here, then, is the poet yearning in spite of himself for something he can't quite allow himself to believe in, which in turn won't allow his disbelief sovereignty either.'⁶⁰ If the writing bears witness to a residually conflicted aspect to Shelley's view of Christianity, it makes for prose that engages us in ways that theological and philosophical argument often fails to do. The text is knowingly scored through with longing and struggle.

Shelley might seem to smuggle back into his discourse a wish to honour what Wallace Stevens calls, albeit in a poem denying transcendental aspirations, 'the voice that is great within us'.⁶¹ Yet the Romantic prose poet can pitilessly dissect the workings of desire, as at the close of *A Future State* (1818) where the possibility of life after death is examined by a side of Shelley he must at least in part overcome in writing *Adonais*:

This desire to be forever as we are, this reluctance to a violent and unexperienced change, which is common to all the animate and inanimate combinations of the universe, is indeed the secret persuasion which has given birth to the opinion of a future state.⁶²

It is because of 'the desire to be forever as we are' that we entertain the idea of what we cannot know; it is because of dislike of a 'violent and unexperienced change' that we play Pascalian wagers in the hope of experiencing what is unimaginable when

confronted by what our senses tell us. The rough draft has more material after this, all of which is crossed out, as though Shelley realized that further investigation would destroy the ‘rondo’, to borrow Coleridge’s word,⁶³ of an essay which opens, ‘It has been the persuasion of an immense majority of human beings in all ages and nations that we continue to live after death—that apparent termination of all the functions of sensitive and intellectual existence.’⁶⁴ Yet the word ‘apparent’, which ushers in ‘all the functions’ as an annulling antithesis to ‘all ages and nations’, may undermine scepticism as much as it critiques credulity. A view is put which is at once unanswerable and finally inadequate, so that the topic feels unexhausted, ready to be reapproached.

Shelley could not be more explicit about his wish to ‘bring the question to the test of experience and fact’ or to establish clearly what we understand ‘By the word death’.⁶⁵ Yet this practice of careful examination wars with sudden eruptions of latent feeling: ‘When you can discover where the fresh colours of the faded flower abide, or the music of the broken lyre, seek life among the dead.’⁶⁶ The sentence behaves as though it were describing an absurdity, but it rehearses one of the functions of literary imagination, its drive to relocate ‘The light that never was, on sea or land’, as Wordsworth calls it in ‘Elegiac Stanzas, Suggested by a Picture of Peele Castle’.⁶⁷

* * *

Such essays are less philosophical meditations than poetic investigations of the drama of mind and heart, expressions of self-awareness about the elusiveness of self-awareness. In one of the ‘Speculations on Metaphysics’ Shelley imagines the benefit that would accrue from a ‘faithful history’ of mental life, only to capture with precision the near-impossibility of introspection:

If it were possible that a person should give a faithful history of his being from the earliest epochs of his recollection, a picture would be presented such as the world has never contemplated before. A mirror would be held up to all men in which they might behold their own recollections, and in dim perspective their shadowy hopes and fears,—all that they dare not, or that daring and desiring, they could not expose to the open light of day—But thought can with difficulty visit the intricate and winding chambers which it inhabits.—It is like a river whose rapid and perpetual stream flows outwards;—like one in dread who speeds through the recesses of some haunted pile and dares not look behind. The caverns of the mind are obscure and shadowy, or pervaded with a lustre, beautifully bright indeed, but shining not beyond their portals. If it were possible to be where we have been, vitally and indeed—if at the moment of our presence there we could define the results of our experience—if the passage from sensation to reflexion—from a state of [passive] to voluntary contemplation were not so dizzying and so tumultuous—this attempt would be less difficult.—⁶⁸

Merle A. Williams helpfully defines the passage as among the moments in Shelley's prose 'when philosophical registers elude him and he turns to allusive, metaphorical writing'.⁶⁹ Shelley suggests that 'thought' may inhabit the chambers but it cannot visit them—and yet that is precisely what his prose seeks often to do, as here: to visit the chambers it inhabits. 'If it were possible' is a phrase repeated to evoke a yearning which is known to be unattainable. 'If it were possible to be where we have been, vitally and indeed', he writes, where 'indeed' recovers a full strength of meaning, suggesting the possibility of such dwelling as a 'deed'. The writing. Implies, 'in act'

and ‘vitality’, Shelley’s desire for his prose to live through its intensity of self-perception. If he senses he cannot accomplish the task, it is because thought cannot pivot on itself; it is less a still point than an image for thought’s habit of streaming onwards.

For Shelley, replaying Sternean comic anxieties in a near-Gothic mode, thought is forever flowing ‘like a river whose rapid and perpetual stream flows outwards; it is ‘like one in dread who speeds through the recesses of some haunted pile and dares not look behind’, the writing absorbing overtones from a simile in Coleridge’s ‘The Rime of the Ancient Mariner’.⁷⁰ Now thought is self-fearful, self-haunted, aware of ‘The caverns of the mind’ as ‘obscure and shadowy; or pervaded with a lustre, beautifully bright indeed, but shining not beyond their portals’. Shelley’s ‘self-experience in the act of thinking’ is often of this kind, one that brings out how ‘dizzying and tumultuous’ the passage is from ‘a state of passive to voluntary contemplation’. ‘The mind’s self-experience’ is Coleridge’s fine phrase in chapter 7 of *Biographia Literaria*, and comparison will bring out the difference between the two writers, Coleridge able to balance active and passive motions of the mind, Shelley thrown from one to the other, yet able to watch and relish the way in which his own imagination is brought into play.⁷¹

Both authors want to convey the process of thought; but it is Shelley’s particular commitment to this process that makes the genre of the brief essay peculiarly right for his endless startings again, his tackling of the big little words: ‘love, life, death’, for example. In these essays, one finds, in Anthony Howe’s perceptive diagnosis, a ‘coming together of the generalizing theoretical and emotively immediate casts of mind that are both strong (and often complementary) in Shelley’.⁷² Shelley’s essay *On Love* proposes as an ideal the self’s ‘discovery of its antitype’, an oddly

unimpassioned phrase that quickly moves into something more impassioned without ever losing the sense that we are within the mind imagining love as a restless quest presided over by a force that will brook no ‘rest or respite’: ‘this is the invisible and unattainable point to which Love tends; and to attain which it urges forth the powers of man to arrest the faintest shadow of that without the possession of which there is no rest or respite to the heart over which it rules’.⁷³ The conflict between ‘unattainable’ and ‘to attain which’ generates an undertow of pathos as the sentence mimics, almost remorselessly, a pursuit that is gloriously doomed from the start.

Style at such moments functions as a mode of thought, moving beyond the language of empirical philosophy to a more inwardly impassioned and poetic form of enquiry, in accord with Shelley’s view that ‘We do not attend sufficiently to what passes within ourselves.’⁷⁴ In *A Defence of Poetry* Shelley rejects the idea that a poet must rely on ‘metre, or a certain system of traditional forms of harmony and language’, and argues that ‘The distinction between poets and prose-writers is a vulgar error.’ He includes under the banner of poetry the writings of Plato, Cicero, and Bacon, contending that Plato ‘forebore to invent any regular plan of rhythm which would include, under determinate forms, the varied pauses of his style’. In any potential combat between ‘varied pauses’ and ‘determinate forms’ this judgement awards the victory to the former.⁷⁵

Shelley’s essay asks to be read not simply as a statement but rather as an exalted and energizing enactment. Responding to his friend Thomas Love Peacock’s wittily provocative dismissal in *The Four Ages of Poetry* of poetry as ‘the mental rattle that awakened the attention of intellect in the infancy of civil society’,⁷⁶ Shelley defends poetry against rationalist critique by using an array of tropes, rhythmic devices, bewitching images—often proceeding less to clothe an idea in a figure than to abolish

or question the binary division between thought and word. If there is a pull in earlier work by Shelley towards seeing words in a Lockean fashion, as, in Paul Fry's phrasing, 'arbitrary signs that obscure the pure essence of thought', the import of *A Defence* is that again, to quote Fry, as he bends to his own ends a half-line from *Prometheus Unbound* (2.4.116), 'the deep truth is not imageless but an image'.⁷⁷ To return to the passage with which this essay began, poetry is 'vitally metaphorical'; 'it marks the before unapprehended relations of things and perpetuates their apprehension', where the rapid dance of bunching, lengthening sound similarities duplicates the effort to perpetuate apprehension through metaphor. But the sentence goes on, mimicking in its syntactical falling away the semantic entropy it describes, to depict a deforming 'until': 'until the words which represent them become through time signs for portions and classes of thoughts, instead of pictures of integral thoughts; and then if no new poets should arise to create afresh the associations which have been thus disorganized, language will be dead to all the nobler purposes of human intercourse'.⁷⁸

The 'harmony in thoughts' does not preclude shifts, collisions of perspective (between in Abrams's terms) 'two planes of thought in Shelley's aesthetics—one Platonistic and mimetic, the other psychological and expressive—applied alternately, as it were', as Abrams notes with an alertness to Shelley's mobility of suggestion, 'to each of the major topics under discussion'.⁷⁹ Sometimes Shelley foregrounds this alternating, as when he teases us in and out of thought through a speedy interplay of complementary, near-contradictory images; 'And whether it [poetry] spreads its own figured curtain or withdraws life's dark veil from before the scene of things, it equally creates for us a being within our being.'⁸⁰ That 'or' is also an 'and' since Shelley makes us recognize in the sentence the need for the 'figured curtain', a need present in

the mention of the curtain and its alternative, 'life's dark veil'. The passage poses its conundrum with a nonchalance that is part of its meaning; whatever the precise nature of poetry's truth claims, 'it equally creates for us a being within our being', permitting a second mode of existence. Through its syntax, imagery, interplay of sound and sense, Shelley's prose, in *A Defence* and elsewhere, is essentially that of a poet. It 'creates afresh', its style kindling an often complex 'harmony in thoughts'.

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¹ Qtd from *Percy Bysshe Shelley: The Major Works*, ed. Zachary Leader and Michael O'Neill (2003; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009 lightly rev.), 676. Shelley's poetry and prose are quoted from this edition, unless indicated otherwise: hereafter *MW*.

² *A Defence of Poetry*, 676.

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- ³ Ross Wilson, 'Poetry as Reanimation in Shelley', in *The Meaning of 'Life' in Romantic Poetry and Poetics*, ed. Ross Wilson (New York: Routledge, 2009), 131. See also the same critic's *Shelley and the Apprehension of Life* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013).
- ⁴ Qtd, respectively, from volume 21 of The Bodleian Shelley Manuscripts, *Miscellaneous Poetry, Prose and Translation from Bodleian MS. Shelley adds. c. 4, etc.*, ed. E. B. Murray (New York: Garland, 1995), 188–9 (photofacsimile and transcription), and from *The Prose Works of Percy Bysshe Shelley*, ed. Harry Buxton Forman, 4 vols (London: Reeves and Turner, 1880), ii. 289. For an 1816–17 date for these passages, see *The Complete Poetry of Percy Bysshe Shelley*, vol. 3, gen. eds Donald H. Reiman, Neil Fraistat, and Nora Crook (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2012), 942.
- ⁵ *A Defence of Poetry*, 679.
- ⁶ *A Defence of Poetry*, 675.
- ⁷ *A Defence of Poetry*, 701.
- ⁸ James Donelan, review of Wayne Deakin, *Hegel and the English Romantic Poets*, *Review of English Studies* (2015), advance access, first published 1 October 2015.
- ⁹ *A Defence of Poetry*, 678. For William Keach, see the opening chapter of *Shelley's Style* (London: Methuen, 1984) and, for his discussion of Shelley's 'affirmative commitment to the arbitrariness of language in the *Defence*', see his *Arbitrary Power: Romanticism, Language, Politics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004), 2. For important work on the presence in Shelley's writing, including his prose, of a 'continual reopening of words towards words, sentences towards sentences, and the text toward a reader', see Jerrold E. Hogle, *Shelley's Process: Radical Transference and the Development of His Major Works* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 276; for further comment, see Edward T. Duffy, *The Constitution of Shelley's Poetry: The Argument of Language in Shelley's 'Prometheus Unbound'* (London: Anthem, 2009), xxxi.

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- ¹⁰ *On Life*, 633.
- ¹¹ *On Life*, 636.
- ¹² *On Life*, 635.
- ¹³ *On Life*, 634, 636. See Earl R. Wasserman, *Shelley: A Critical Reading* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1971), 139–48, and Michael A. Vicario, *Shelley's Intellectual System and Its Epicurean Background* (New York: Routledge, 2007), 185.
- ¹⁴ *On Life*, 635–6.
- ¹⁵ *On Life*, 635.
- ¹⁶ Timothy Clark, *Embodying Revolution: The Figure of the Poet in Shelley* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989), 40.
- ¹⁷ I am indebted to Alan Weinberg for this idea.
- ¹⁸ *On Life*, 636.
- ¹⁹ Jonathan Culler, 'Apostrophe', in *The Pursuit of Signs: Semiotics, Literature, Deconstruction* (1981; London: Routledge, 2001), 166.
- ²⁰ Wasserman, *Shelley: A Critical Reading*, 149.
- ²¹ E. B. Murray (ed.), *The Prose Works of Percy Bysshe Shelley*, vol. 1 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 447.
- ²² Martin Priestman, 'A Place to Stand: Questions of Address in Shelley's Political Pamphlets', in *The Unfamiliar Shelley*, ed. Alan Weinberg and Timothy Webb (Farnham: Ashgate, 2009), 231.
- ²³ *An Address to the People*, 623.
- ²⁴ Qtd from *William Wordsworth*, 21st-Century Oxford Authors, ed. Stephen Gill (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 3–4. (Hereafter WW)

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- ²⁶ *An Address to the People*, 630–1.
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- ³³ Yeats, ‘We make out of the quarrel with others, rhetoric, but of the quarrel with ourselves, poetry’, in *The Poems of W. B. Yeats: A Sourcebook*, ed. Michael O’Neill (London: Routledge, 2004), 25.
- ³⁴ Thomas Paine, *Rights of Man*, 7th edn (London: Jordan, 1791), 26: ‘He pities the plumage, but forgets the dying bird.’

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- ³⁵ Michael Henry Scrivener, *Radical Shelley: The Philosophical Anarchism and Utopian Thought of Percy Bysshe Shelley* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1982), 135.
- ³⁶ Scrivener, *Radical Shelley*, 137.
- ³⁷ Scrivener, *Radical Shelley*, 137.
- ³⁸ Steven E. Jones, 'Politics and Satire', in *The Oxford Handbook of Percy Bysshe Shelley*, ed. Michael O'Neill and Anthony Howe, with the assistance of Madeleine Callaghan (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 154.
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- ⁴¹ *A Philosophical View of Reform*, 652.
- ⁴² *King Lear* (conflated text), 3.4.29–30, in *The Norton Shakespeare*.
- ⁴³ *A Philosophical View of Reform*, 652.
- ⁴⁴ *A Philosophical View of Reform*, 651.
- ⁴⁵ *A Philosophical View of Reform*, 651.
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- ⁶⁸ Qtd from Bodleian MS Shelley adds c. 4, f. 184r in Bodleian Shelley Manuscripts, vol. 21, ed. Murray, 192–5, tidied up; the passage appears in Mary Shelley’s edition, *Essays, Letters from Abroad, Translations and Fragments by Percy Bysshe Shelley*, 2 vols (London: Moxon, 1840), i. 246–7. For a possible 1816 date, see *The Complete Poetry of Percy Bysshe Shelley*, iii, ed. Reiman, Fraistat, and Crook, 480.
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- ⁷⁶ See Peacock’s ‘Four Ages of Poetry’; Shelley’s ‘Defence of Poetry’; Browning’s ‘Essay on Shelley’, ed. H. F. B. Brett-Smith, 2nd edn (1923; Oxford: Blackwell, 1972), 18.
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